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AUTHOR Colhapp, Barbara Jones
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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the National Issues Forum (NIF), a national, nonpartisan program designed to encourage citizen discussion of important public issues. The programs try to recreate the town meeting concept of reaching consensus on public issues. Short workbooks are available on two reading levels for issues such as the superpowers, crime, immigration, and health care for the elderly. The article explains how the NIF concept and materials can be used in adult basic education (ABE) programs. Some guidelines for implementing NIF in ABE programs are offered. Topics covered include the moderator's role, how to start the NIF discussion, a values questionnaire, helping students focus on the issue, and benefits of participation. (KC)

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TECHNIQUES

Integrating the National Issues Forums into ABE programs

By Barbara Jones Colhapp

They were all adults. Some were working. Some were not. Others were serving time for crimes against society. But they all had one thing in common — an interest in national issues. What brought them together three times over the last few months was discussion of national issues under the auspices of the National Issues Forums (NIF), a project of the non-profit Domestic Policy Association. The primary purpose of the forums is to get citizens at all community levels to talk about issues of national concern.

Because the ABE classroom is an existing system, it is a natural vehicle for citizen discussion. How wonderful to use the opportunity. That's the way in which this group was brought together in Minnesota and in a women's prison.

Here is a workable model which integrates the NIF study circle format into the ABE classroom. The purpose is to mesh low-ability reading adults, ESL, GED, and post-high school students into one group. The result is increased student motivation, development of reading skills, enhanced self-esteem, and ability to discuss opinions on public issues.

What Is the National Issues Forums

NIF is a national, nonpartisan program designed to encourage citizen discussion of important public issues. NIF is administered by the Domestic Policy Association and supported by the Kettering Foundation in an effort to recreate the town meeting concept of reaching consensus on public issues.

Short workbooks on current issues are prepared on two reading levels. Some of the topics currently available are: Coping with AIDS, the Superpowers, Crime, Immigration, and Health Care for the Elderly. In all cases, three or four different courses of action are presented, as well as a three-page introduction explaining the history of the topic.

For example there are four choices in *Superpowers: Nuclear Weapons and National Security*.

- The Soviets have a commitment to expand their power, and therefore the only way for the U.S. to ensure peace is to regain the upper hand.
- Before the U.S. can deal with the Soviet threat, it must face a more deadly one, the nuclear threat. We must find ways to reduce the nuclear arms race.
- The United States should try to reduce tensions by working more closely with the Soviets.
- Would the U.S. be more secure if it withdrew its forces from abroad?

Each choice takes three or four pages. Cartoons and pictures help students grasp the idea. There is a cartoon of Gorbachev with the caption "Not What He Seems"; a picture shows a man watching a radar screen. Both convey the tensions of the "Superpower" relations. The NIF books structure the choices in terms of values and beliefs held by a democratic society. They purposely challenge people to face these hard choices. The purpose of the forums is to work through the pros and cons to a consensus.

Participants' Role

Ground rules for NIF study circles expect the participants to listen to others, to disagree politely with facts, and to ask questions for clarification. They must be aware that forum talk has to be more than just a bull session. Assure them that all ideas and opinions will be acknowledged and that anyone at any time can choose not to comment. This creates an environment where people will feel comfortable talking about hard choices and values which may reveal a little about themselves. Making choices is hard work. Reaching consensus requires more information about divergent points of view. It creates an awareness of the complexity of making policy decisions.

Moderators' Role

Guides are available on each subject. To help reach consensus, value questions are suggested for each choice. The guides also highlight new and important vocabulary. Moderators (teachers) may intervene or enter the conversation for a number of reasons. Some of these are to establish and enforce ground rules, clarify, interpret, elaborate, handle conflict, move the conversation forward, and keep it on topic, explore relationships, involve others, keep individuals from dominating, identify progress, or deal with prejudice.

The Decision: Getting Started

Have the subject and the four choices printed on four choices of newsprint with a few graphics such as weapons and flags. It is important to use a variety of systems to deliver information to accommodate visual, kinesthetic and auditory learners. Tell participants that for the next thirty minutes or so they will be involved in a discussion on the current issues *The Superpowers: Nuclear Weapons and National Security*. Lay out discussion ground rules and assure them of their right to remain silent; listening and learning is also participating.

Introduce an "icebreaker", which on this subject could be — "What do you think the world would be like after a nuclear explosion?" Encourage imaginative and succinct comments. The icebreaker segment should not exceed ten minutes and its creativity can encompass pantomime, oral or written expression. For example, during the Reagan/Gorbachev summit in Iceland, each pair of students role-played what these leaders might say to each other. "Ron, your wife may have beauty, but mine has brains." Levity in the study circle eases tensions and gives permission for freedom of expression and risk taking. Often the icebreaker is the first part of the study circle for which students will volunteer future responsibility and possibly lead that segment the following week.

Values Questionnaire

Explain that even though most of the group has limited knowledge about the Superpowers, the Kettering Foundation which provides workbooks wants to know what we believe both before and after studying this issue. Read the questionnaire to the students, explaining vocabulary without influencing opinion. In the Superpowers issue, they are asked to rank in order of importance the four possible threats which will be discussed.

Helping Students Focus on the Issue

In adapting the NIF materials to an ABE classroom, I chose to present one of the four points of view in each of four sessions. Briefly refer to the prepared display printed on the board along with the simple schematic drawings. This assures the low-reading adult that he can participate and reinforces a variety of learning styles that are probably represented in the study circle.

To focus on each item, present questions that are likely to engage critical thinking. One quickly becomes familiar with the Moderator's Guide format of restating, clarifying, and summarizing. Remember to use the pictures and cartoons in the guide book to generate discussion. Students who can't read well are usually adept at interpreting visual materials.

When using the issue books, preview the first paragraph and suggest reading it in unison. After two or three paragraphs, ask a critical thinking question: "What could the United States do to assure itself and the world that the major powers will not flex their military might?" Guide students in the use of new vocabulary words about security, defense, and cold war. Give them the opportunity to formulate opinions and to take risks with their new vocabulary. Remember, speaking in public is a risk. By way of summary at the end of each session, state any points of agreement.

A half-hour discussion can maintain an enthusiastic energetic level of participation. After ten or fifteen minutes, pause to restate and summarize because the concentration of some may be faltering. Even if students are still bursting to make comments, draw the first session to a close by asking people to review the things they've heard or learned. These comments may be printed and then posted when beginning the next study circle. Encourage students to read supplemental clippings, to bring drawings, or to listen to the news. A student may volunteer to prepare pertinent materials for the next study circle.

The study circle activity can easily be carried over to the ABE classroom. Utilize the new vocabulary and encourage students to write a few sentences about the previous discussion. This is an opportunity to guide the students in drawing logical conclusions, examining causal relations, and evaluating relevant information.

Benefits

Students should be encouraged to discuss local issues during breaks between NIF topics. This validates the process and helps participants see how to apply it to real life concerns.

The NIF Issues book states, "The kind of talk that takes place in these forums is special. People are invited to look at an issue from three or four different viewpoints. Then they have chance to talk with their neighbors

and explore responses to common problems. They learn more about how and when they can agree." What an enriching gift the study circle is to our students. Their inclusion gives them the message that they are intelligent, capable of critical thinking, and their opinions have value because of their knowledge and factual foundation.

One young mother with a third grade reading level said, "Thank you, Barb. No one has ever listened to me before."

Summary of Study Circle Procedure for ABE Classes

1. Lay out ground rules.
2. Always begin with an icebreaker.
3. Prepare appropriate graphics, including new vocabulary, issue choices, etc.
4. Plan for short sessions of 30 minutes or so. Reading, discussions, and summarization should be included in each session.
5. Follow Moderator's Guide to keep discussion on track.
6. Prepare a definite closure for each session using the question format. "What was the one thing you heard that you think is important?"
7. At the final session, guide the study circle to consensus, however limited. Emphasize that informed citizenry and democracy exist when people discuss issues even though they may have different points of view which make it difficult to agree. AAACE

Barbara Jones Colhapp is the lead ABE facilitator of the Carver-Scott Cooperative Center in Chaska, MN.